

Informant:	LMP-S13	Spanish
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CH: To start off I would like to ask you if you are a religious expert such as babalu or do you have a role in particular?

S13: Babalu? I'm not a babalu, I'm a santero.

CH: Osainista?

S13: Yes, I was consecrated in Osain- it's a really important part of a santero. Even though not all santeros have to have been consecrated in Osain to be Osainistas or to have knowledge about the use of herbs.

CH: So why did you chose this specialty? Is it more important to be a santero that is initiated in the practices of Osain?

S13: It's not that I chose to be part of this; I was born in this religion. So since I was born in it they teach us in our early years about plants and how to use them- because this is a fundamental part of our religion. Becoming an Osainista is a compliment to this religion. Not everyone of us is an Osainista. A lot of us are, but not all. Some have some knowledge about the use of plants, but they are not necessarily Osainistas. I was initiated in this religion since I was one year old.

CH: Like a baptism?

S13: Not really because that happens when you're born, but I did start really early. At the age of one I made the saint.

CH: Can you tell me a little bit about how you made the saint? Did you decide to make the saint or were you chosen by your family?

S13: My mother had Oshun made- she was a santera and this happened after she gave birth and I was born. I was born unable to walk and because of this situation I was made the saint. So it wasn't that I chose to make the saint, but I just needed to make it. It was the need to make it because I already had a call to do this. So it was already known who was going be born, who he was going to be and what this religion was going to make out of him.

CH: How long have you been in the U.S?

S13: I have been here for 19 years.

CH: But you always go back to Cuba?

S13: No, this last time was the first time I went.

CH: Besides living here in the L.A area, have you lived somewhere else?

S13: No, this has always been the place where I've lived.

CH: Did you come here with your family?

S13: No, I came on my own.

CH: And when you got here did you have a botanica or did you practice your religion in your home?

S13: That's the interesting part. When I got here, I didn't bring my saints, they didn't come with me. They got here a while after I got here. But while I waited for them, I didn't practice my religion. I didn't think it was professional to practice a religion I couldn't prove I was in. That's what happened to a lot of people. They got here saying they were santeros and that they had brought saints while most of them didn't even have a saint made. This is the reason why we lost the trust a lot of people had in our religion. So when I finally got my saints I called people that were taking this religion seriously and made the appropriate ceremony for them. This is when I started practicing Santeria in my house as well as in people's houses. But I never ever did it before my saints got here.

CH: I am not too familiar with this religion so can you tell me exactly what got here when you say your saints arrived?

S13: It is the secret of the religion that got here.

CH: So you had to call other people to be present in this event?

S13: Yes, I needed somebody to be here as witness that my saints had already arrived here from Cuba. So you feed the people and give them refreshments. This is when people know you are really a known santero.

CH: And if this ceremony wouldn't have happened then the community wouldn't accept you as a real santero?

S13: They would have recognized me as a santero of the community, but there's always a doubt. Is he really a santero? Where are his saints? Who made him the saint? Who brought them to him? So thank God I do know people here that knew my mother in law and my elders in Cuba and that was good for my stability

CH: Is it really important to have witnesses in this religion?

S13: Witnesses are the reason why we are in this religion and in many other things. You need a witness to be able to prove what you do, where you're going to and where you're at. Sometimes there are people that can blame you for things that you did not do. So having a witness helps you prove that you were or were not in a certain place. I can't make a saint to someone without the help of other people. I need the knowledge of other santeros to help me make the saint. And when that person has gone through that ceremony, they can say that they have a saint made, that I made them their saint, and that

this is where it all happened. For example, if I am a cook and nobody knows where I work or where I cook, who's going to know I am a cook? You have to go see me in a restaurant and say this is where he works and this is where he's at.

CH: So when your saints got here and you were established as a santero, the only place where you worked was your home?

S13: I had a stable job and then after I got out of work every evening I would come back home and would help out people here in my house.

CH: So it was like having two jobs?

S13: Exactly.

CH: Have you ever had a botanica?

S13: Yes, I had one but because of my other job I had to close it since I didn't have time to take care of it.

CH: What was it called?

S13: Elena's Botanica.

CH: How long ago did you open it?

S13: About five years ago.

CH: And when did you close it?

S13: It's actually still open but I am not the owner anymore. It probably has a different name now.

CH: Is it here in East L.A?

S13: No, it's in Santa Ana.

CH: So you've been practicing this religion since you were one year old?

S13: Well, when I was one I made the saint but then I went through the process of learning about this religion- seeing, hearing, and all that.

CH: So the people that were of great influence to you were your mother and your father?

S13: My mother was a great influence for me. Even though she's not here she's still a source of saintly inspiration. My God parents and my elders- all of which are dead have also been of great influence for me. Life has also made me learn a lot in regards to this religion.

CH: So what happened to your legs when you were born? Did you have a disease?

S13: The doctors said they were epileptic attacks where I lost all bodily functions and my body became flaccid, it wasn't until I was a year and a half old that I started walking. So after I made the saint my health started coming back until today. Even though medicine did play a role in my recuperation process, my destiny was the one that had already predisposed what was going to happen to me.

CH: So when was it that you started learning about herbs and the way they are used in Santeria and in these traditions?

S13: This is learned day by day. Our main elements are plants. Without them we cannot do anything. They are extremely essential and important. So I learned this with my elders. I saw the way they chose them, how they would grow them, where they would grow them, and how to take care of them. One of the most important things about taking care of plant is to talk to them and to be able to ask them for a specific purpose you want them to have. So that's a way I learned how to use plants for **lavatorios**, for cleansings, to refresh, to clean our houses, our aura, and our path.

CH: Is there something in particular that you tell the plants?

S13: As santero I am very lucky to have had my ancestors tell me the secrets and mysteries found in plants, and that we are able to talk to them, we are able to know when to cut them, what time they are awake, and what time they are sleeping. So time is really important in order to make use of the specific function we want to give that plant. A plant that's asleep doesn't work, while a plant that's awake does work.

CH: Do all plants sleep?

S13: There are some plants that sleep and rest, while others that don't. These kind have a function during the day and a different function at night. It all depends on how you're going to use that plant and in what way you're going to use it.

CH: Can you give me an example of a plant where you have to say something very specific in order for it to function the way you want it to or of a plant that you have to cut either on nighttime or on daytime?

S13: We have a plant called *dormidera*. When you touch it with your hands, it falls asleep. It closes up completely in a period of five minutes. And after five minutes, it opens up again. So it goes to sleep and awakens. This flower is good for insomnia and for people that suffer from anxiety. You prepare it on a tea and you sleep well because it is a very relaxing plant. It is a very sensitive plant because with a soft touch of your finger, it goes to sleep. It is very hard to find here in California but they have it in Hawaii.

CH: So what do you tell the plant?

S13: You can pray an Our Father or a Holy Mary or you can ask it before touching it to help with a specific favor. It is a tradition from us santeros to leave it a **derecho**. We pray to it and we invoke the good spirits and we tell them what we want to use this plant for. We leave a couple of coins as the **derecho** that we're paying for the service that

we're getting and so that it will continue giving fruit. But these are customs that have been lost.

CH: How much do you leave?

S13: Just two or three pennies. But it's something really symbolic.

S13: And we would help people that are seriously in need of us in a specific time in their lives.

CH: So you have festivities for your orishas every once in a while? Is it something that orishas ask you to do or do you on your own decide to organize a celebration as a way of thanking them, or is it a tradition?

S13: We can interpret this in many ways. When a santero celebrates his birthday of having made a saint, that santero can make invitations, cook a dinner, and have his friends and relatives come over. They can also bring some drummers over and have music. Or they can organize a smaller party and simply do it as a way of thanking the orisha for granting the chance to become a santero. There is no need for the orisha to ask for a party, or a fruit or a meal. We do that as a way of thanking that we are alive, and that we are comfortable with the life we have. For example, for the recent party that I made for Ossain, he didn't ask me for a **tambor** or for anything. I gave that **tambor** because I was inspired to do so. I wanted to thank him for enabling me to be alive, breathing and with happiness. I also wanted to thank him for making me the person who I am and allowing me to be here. We can't just for no reason walk up to someone and tell him or her to take a bath with a certain herb so they will recover. We have to analyze each case very seriously and have very clear in your mind what the problem is. Then you decide whether the patient will take a bath, will light a candle, will fill up a glass of water, or will take a **despojo**. It all depends on the situation and the moment that the person is in that specific situation. Of course, my mission as a santero is to advise my patients as best as I can leaving a clear explanation of what they have to do, always doing it with faith. Faith moves mountains, without faith, nothing happens.

CH: Are all santeros espiritists or just some of them?

S13: Being spiritual people and being espiritists is more important than being santeros. Some develop espiritism and some don't. Some of them serve as a medium for trance where the spirit can go through their body to send messages. Some of them are clairvoyant, which enable them to see what others can't; while some others are **oyentes**, which are people that are able to hear what the spirit has to tell them. You don't have to bring down a spirit in order to be an espiritist. The world of spirits is very different from the world of saints. The world of spirits is much deeper, much more mysterious, and much more the reason for the reason of things. It is a world very distinct from others.

CH: So you need to have been born an espiritist?

S13: Every human being is born an espiritist. The only difference is some of us develop our qualities as espiritist and some of us don't. But we all have a sixth sense. This happens when we for example feel we will have a visitor, and then someone knocks on

the door. It's a medium of communication between you and your spiritual guide that delivers messages. Some people don't develop these qualities because they don't have a guide to tell them how to use them. But we are all spiritual people.

CH: So spirituality is something that we can develop at different stages of our lives?

S13: Before we are born we have life and we have death. Life and death are bound together in the fetus. The fetus has life and has death. Some are born, some aren't- some don't ever see the light of life. Life and death are procreated together; they are bound to each other. It is not until someone is born that life and death become separated. When birth happens. Life and death split from each other for an instance and once again become united. We are always alive but we are always death. When you dream, you travel to other dimensions, and therefore you die. Life has ceased, life is calm. You travel, talk, have conversations, you leave, you come back. You are doing a transition of good and bad, of real and unreal. Then you slowly go back to life. So since birth you are born as a spiritual being. The spirit goes into the body. The spirit is the one that talks, that has conversations. We are a spirit with a body. We are a spirit that's in a cage- and that cage is our body. So you get to a point in life where you have to free that spirit. We free ourselves but we often don't have time to go back. This is when matter stays passive. You are always developing your spirituality. When you are a hard worker in school, when you get good grades, when you solve a problem, when you are done with your thesis, when you become a lawyer, when you become a great painter. In all these examples, your spirituality is developing itself in the knowledge you are receiving. Your spirit is the one that develops that path. So you have developed your spirituality because if you wouldn't have, you would not be able to think, act, or make decisions. You can distinguish a color from another color, a smell from another smell, a perfume from another one and so on. So your spirituality is your spiritual development.

CH: So people can develop more and more their spirituality.

S13: Life is about growing and development of your spirituality. In life you learn something new every day. Every day you discover something new about yourself. Every day you learn how to know yourself more and you learn how to become a better person. Your spirit is the one that demands you become better and better and better and be able to give more.

CH: The difference is some people are not conscious of the fact that our own spirit is guiding us.

S13: Exactly. There are some people that think they will die just because they have to. A car without gas or with an engine that is not appropriately taken care of doesn't run. If our brain is not calm and is not well focused, it doesn't work. So our spirit is like an engine. If we don't take care of it and we don't educate it, it can get out of control. You can just imagine what can happen to a car without breaks. This can also happen to a human being. So there is a spiritual control in our lives that tells us what to do and why to do it.

CH: Since you told me before that you often gather with other santeros to help people in your community, do you ever gather with people from other religious communities?

S13: No. Not with people that are not santeros.

CH: So you can't combine your religion with any other one when you are helping someone?

S13: Spiritually we all have the capacity to cure. No matter if you are Buddhist or from any other religion, the spirit is only one- called with different names, and having different colors, and forms. The spirit is the spirit.

CH: What part of Cuba were you born in?

S13: I was born in a province called Pinar del Rio. My mother was also born here and my father is Brazilian. My father met my mother in Cuba and so that's where I was born.

CH: Do you have any other brothers or sisters?

S13: Everyone from my mother's side still live in Cuba. My brothers and sisters from my father's side live in Brazil.

CH: I didn't ask you at the beginning of the interview, what is your full name?

S13: Lazaro de Acosta de Pimentel.

CH: How old are you?

S13: I am 50 years old.

CH: What is your birthdate?

S13: June 20, 1951.

CH: So was it your family that guided you in your knowledge as an Osainista or was it your godparents?

S13: It was both my family and my godparents. You start by learning how to use the basic plants. It is years of experience, and of study. It is something kind of scientific. In this religion we do learn the essentials in order to be able to have our rituals. Everything is learned with time, either with your parents, with your elders, with other santeros. Say if I don't know what the use of certain plant is and then I ask my Nicaraguan friend, she can tell me how they use it in her country.

CH: Is the list of basic herbs long or is it pretty short?

S13: There's no such thing as a long or a short list. The botanica is humongous. But it all depends which saint you are working with. For example if you're going to do a **lavatorio** for San Lazaro which is Babalu Aye, he has herbs with very strong odors and he is one of the only saints with herbs that cannot be blended in with the herbs of any other saint. He has his own specific and very special herbs just for himself- for his rites, for his baths, for his **lavatorios**. Since he had sores all over his body, he needed strong herbs that would

heal his wounds quickly. He couldn't use any herbs that would cause an allergic reaction or that would burn his skin. We have to be very careful because there are some herbs that if blended with others, they can cause skin rashes. One of the most famous one of these is La Maravilla, which we all highly respect. It's not fear, it's just a sort of distrust because it itches. But this herb is really important in our religion. So no matter how itchy it is, you still have to use it. So there we are trying to figure out who got a lot of it and who got barely nothing.

CH: So for example a plant used for Chango can be the same herb used for another orisha?

S13: Yes, except for San Lazaro's because they are separate. Osain shares everything for everyone. We all use the necessary herbs and each saint shares with each other. But after that plant has been processed or that plant has been shared, the way to prepare it is very different. You have to specify exactly what saint will carry what. The herbs are shared, but not the condiments. It's like food. Not everything uses the same condiments. So this is where we do use herbs, but the condiments are separated.

CH: Can you explain me a little bit about Osain? What is the story about Osain? Why is he so important and how did he arrive to the pantheon of the orishas?

S13: There are so many versions, that everyone tells the story they heard. It is said that Osain doesn't have a mother or father. He was born out of nature itself. This is believable because there are some plants that don't need to be planted or taken care of in order for them to grow wild. He is everything that sprouts by itself, everything that procreates itself, and all living nature is Osain. This is the first stage of Osain.

CH: I noticed that last week when we came to your party Oshun was present. Is she present when Osain is present?

S13: It all depends. In my case, I have Oshun made. When I went to make Osain and I went to make it the **registro**, Oshun wanted to be the witness for all the ceremonies that I had for Osain. As my mother she wanted to see what was being done to her son and to see if I was doing everything correctly. So that's why every time I do something for Osain, I have to give her her own space in my ceremonies as my religious mother. Because at the birth of Osain she asked to be a witness and she asked to be fed as much as Osain is being fed.

CH: How long have you had Osain made?

S13: I received Osain three years ago.

CH: Can you tell us what each one of the necklaces mean?

S13: This is San Lazaro. This is one of the paths that San Lazaro has. It's called Alua and it is all in black. It has jet and it has its seven snails. It is one of the paths San Lazaro has.

CH: Does it need exactly seven snails?

S13: Can't have more, can't have less. These are the different materials we use to make the necklaces.

CH: How about these other beads? Is there a meaning for them?

S13: Yes, these divide the amount of beads each section has. You can count every 17. Seventeen is San Lazaro's number. The way you divide your necklace depends on the saint's number. Seventeen and seven are the numbers because one and seven together is seventeen.

CH: So every necklace that you make for saints have a number pattern?

S13: Yes, we have number patterns but also color patterns depending on the path, and depending on the color of the orisha. Some people, because of lack of knowledge, don't make the necklaces right, but they can be fixed.